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Security Nexus Perspectives

ADDRESSING SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN THE PACIFIC: IMPLICATIONS FOR GENDER EQUALITY, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, AND WOMEN IN FIJI

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Abstract: Sexual harassment is a critical issue that undermines gender equality and economic development. Global estimates suggest that 23% of employed people have experienced one or more forms of violence or harassment at work in their lives. In the Pacific, this percentage is closer to 30-40%. Despite efforts to address workplace harassment, many Pacific Island nations, including Fiji, face significant legislative and cultural barriers that impede progress. This paper explores the intersection of sexual harassment, gender equality, and economic development in the Pacific, focusing on Fiji's legislative framework and social challenges. Drawing on interviews with the Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FWRM), it highlights the prevalence of workplace harassment, the systemic flaws in reporting mechanisms, and the broader impact on women's economic participation. The paper argues that addressing sexual harassment is essential for protecting women's rights and unlocking the full economic potential of the Pacific. Addressing gender inequalities and promoting a safer work environment for women, Fiji, and other Pacific nations can drive sustainable development and foster inclusive growth.

Keywords: Workplace violence, Gender-based discrimination, Legislative reform, Economic participation, Pacific Island development

Gender equality, as emphasized in the fifth goal of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, is a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable world.¹ Despite decades of progress, the world remains off track to achieve gender equality by 2030.² Women and girls, who constitute half of the world's population and, consequently, half of its potential, continue to face pervasive inequalities that hinder social and economic progress. One manifestation of this inequality is sexual harassment, particularly in the workplace.

One global study found that 23% of employed people have experienced one or more forms of violence or harassment at work in their lives.³ According to the International Labour Organization's (ILO) policy brief on eliminating sexual harassment in workplaces in the Pacific, this percentage is closer to 30-40% in the Asia-Pacific region.⁴ Additionally, 1 in 4 people who reported being sexually harassed in the last five years experienced adverse impacts on their employment, career, or work.⁵ Despite these alarming statistics, the true scale of the problem is likely much larger due to significant underreporting and limited research. The economic impact is equally concerning: in 2018, workplace sexual harassment was estimated to result in \$2.62 billion in lost productivity, representing a substantial loss to GDP.⁶

In 2014, the ILO commissioned baseline research on sexual harassment in workplaces across Pacific Island member states, revealing several critical issues.⁷ For one, sexual harassment in the workplace is not widely acknowledged as a significant issue, and there is a notable scarcity of quantitative research on the subject.⁸ While some evidence indicates that sexual harassment is prevalent, it remains substantially underreported.⁹ Only a few Pacific Island states have enacted comprehensive legislation explicitly addressing sexual harassment in the workplace.¹⁰ There is no legal requirement for employers to implement policies on sexual harassment, resulting in many workplaces lacking clear

¹ United Nations. "Goal 5: Achieve Gender Equality and Empower All Women and Girls." United Nations Sustainable Development. Accessed September 12, 2024. <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/gender-equality/>.

² Ibid.

³ Crabtree, Steve. "Global Study: 23% of Workers Experience Violence, Harassment." Gallup News, December 14, 2022. <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/406793/global-study-workers-experience-violence-harassment.aspx>.

⁴ International Labour Organization (ILO) Office for Pacific Island Countries. "Eliminating Sexual Harassment in Workplaces in the Pacific: Policy Brief." Suva, Fiji: ILO Office for Pacific Island Countries, 2015.

⁵ Australian Government. "Impacts of Workplace Sexual Harassment." RespectatWork, 2022. Accessed September 12, 2024. <https://www.respectatwork.gov.au/individual/understanding-workplace-sexual-harassment/impacts-workplace-sexual-harassment>.

⁶ Deloitte Access Economics. "The Economic Costs of Sexual Harassment in the Workplace: Final Report." Sydney: Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu, March 2020. <https://www.deloitte.com/content/dam/assets-zone1/au/en/docs/services/economics/deloitte-au-economic-costs-sexual-harassment-workplace-240320.pdf>.

⁷ International Labour Organization (ILO) Office for Pacific Island Countries. "Eliminating Sexual Harassment in Workplaces in the Pacific: Policy Brief." Suva, Fiji: ILO Office for Pacific Island Countries, 2015.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

guidelines or preventative measures.¹¹ Finally, where complaint mechanisms do exist, they are often complex, difficult to comprehend, and challenging for victims to navigate when seeking justice.¹² Although the Pacific Islands have significant potential for economic growth, progress has been hindered by various factors, including persistent gender inequalities. Women in Pacific Island countries, as in many other countries, earn less than men, spend more time in unpaid domestic and care work, and face higher risks of sexual harassment in the workplace. By focusing on the intersection of sexual harassment with development goals, this paper uses Fiji as an example to critically examine the implications of sexual harassment on the Pacific's economic and social progress, arguing that addressing these issues is crucial in unlocking the region's full potential.

Fiji

To understand the implications of sexual harassment on economic and social progress in the Pacific, it is crucial to examine how this issue plays out in specific contexts. As one of the more legislatively developed Pacific Island nations, Fiji serves as an illustrative example.

To gain a deeper understanding of how sexual harassment affects economic and social progress in Fiji, I interviewed the Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FWRM), a key advocacy organization working to advance gender equality and address issues of violence against women in Fiji. FWRM is at the forefront of research and activism on sexual harassment in the country, and notably, the only significant research on the topic has emerged from their efforts. This makes their perspective invaluable in understanding both the legislative landscape and the real-world challenges that persist for victims of harassment in Fiji.

On April 10, 1986, 56 women from diverse backgrounds gathered in Suva for a 3-hour meeting, determined to address laws and policies that discriminated against women or overlooked their concerns.¹³ Many of these women had been involved in founding the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre the previous year and were members of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA).¹⁴ They recognized the need for a separate, multiethnic organization that would serve as an outspoken advocate for women's rights across various issues.¹⁵ This meeting laid the groundwork for the Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FWRM), which officially received its name several weeks later.¹⁶ From the start, the group was committed to challenging the socio-economic and political imbalances women face.¹⁷

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FWRM). "HerStory: Celebrating 25 Years of Balancing the Scales." Suva, Fiji: Fiji Women's Rights Movement, 2012. <https://www.fwrn.org.fj/images/PDFs/HerStory/Herstory.pdf>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

FWRM emerged during a period of social transformation in Fiji, following at least two decades of growing activism, beginning in the 1960s, when women started demanding equal status and respect in all areas of society.¹⁸ The decade leading up to its founding—1976 to 1985—had been declared the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development, and Peace, further amplifying global and local attention on women's rights.¹⁹ Against this backdrop, FWRM was founded as a feminist organization rooted in fundamental human rights, focused on advocating for critical policy and legal reforms to improve the status of women in Fiji.

The rise of women in the workforce, fueled by achieving gender parity in education, underscored the need for legal protections against workplace harassment.²⁰ As FWRM explained, the increase in women entering the workforce in the 1970s and 1980s coincided with the violence they had faced at home and in public spaces becoming prevalent in workplaces.²¹ In response, FWRM launched advocacy efforts to shape employment laws, resulting in the inclusion of sexual harassment as a prohibited act in Fiji's 2007 Employment Relations Promulgation Act (ERA).²² This achievement was a direct product of FWRM's long-standing activism.²³ Their research, first conducted in 2002 and later expanded in 2016, catalyzed nationwide advocacy campaigns to address workplace sexual harassment.²⁴

Despite the significant strides FWRM has made in advocating for legislative reform and raising public awareness, challenges remain. As Bernice Lata, the Legal Rights Officer of FWRM, explained during our interview, the cultural and institutional barriers that allow sexual harassment to persist are deeply entrenched.²⁵ Fiji's patriarchal structures continue to hinder progress, with many women still unaware that the inappropriate behavior they face in workplaces constitutes sexual harassment.²⁶ Even those aware may choose not to report it due to fear of retribution, stigma, or distrust in the legal system.²⁷

One of the most pressing issues is the flawed enforcement of existing laws. While the Employment Relations Promulgation Act (ERA) of 2007 includes sexual harassment as a prohibited act, there is a lack of capacity and political will to investigate and prosecute such cases effectively.²⁸ Lata noted that

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Parikh, Richa. "Interview with Bernice Lata and Priyanka Chandra, Fiji Women's Rights Movement." Unpublished manuscript, September 2, 2024.

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1HWYXs5dYmZHVEcDw4ft3ndjgvsnpMrNhClfzGptZ8Yw/edit?usp=sharing>.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

the police and Ministry of Labor often fail to take complaints seriously, and some investigators do not fully understand the evidence required to pursue sexual harassment claims.²⁹ This systemic failure discourages victims from seeking justice, as they see little hope of their cases being appropriately handled.³⁰

Further complicating the issue is the pervasive culture of silence in Fiji. As Lata highlighted, even though social movements like #MeToo have helped bring sexual harassment into the spotlight globally, the cultural norms in Fiji discourage open discussion about these experiences.³¹ Many victims internalize the violence they face, often tolerating it out of economic necessity or fear of being labeled troublemakers.³² This is especially true for women in male-dominated fields, where speaking out could jeopardize their already precarious positions in the workforce.³³

The persistence of sexual harassment in Fiji has broader implications for the country's development, particularly concerning economic growth and social progress. Gender-based violence, including harassment in the workplace, not only impacts individual victims but also has significant economic costs. As Lata discussed in our interview, sexual harassment in the workplace contributes to lost productivity, absenteeism, and job turnover, which collectively undermine workforce participation and economic stability.³⁴

Fiji already faces a stark gender gap in labor force participation, with only 38% of women in the workforce compared to 77% of men.³⁵ This disparity is exacerbated by workplace violence, which discourages women from advancing in their careers or forces them to leave jobs altogether. As Lata shared, many women remain in environments where they experience harassment due to economic necessity, often because they are the primary breadwinners for their families.³⁶ In such cases, the fear of losing their income outweighs their desire to report the abuse, creating a cycle where economic vulnerability and workplace violence reinforce one another.³⁷

From a development perspective, addressing sexual harassment is crucial to unlocking Fiji's full economic potential. Women's equal participation in the workforce is directly linked to economic

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ World Bank. "Fiji Gender Diagnostics: Opportunities for Promoting Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment." Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group, 2023. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/09981310626213267/pdf/IDU049c4d35a015b304e8c0be4f0f1dd79c252c6.pdf>.

³⁶ Parikh, Richa. "Interview with Bernice Lata and Priyanka Chandra, Fiji Women's Rights Movement." Unpublished manuscript, September 2, 2024. <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1HWYXs5dYmZHEcDw4ft3ndjgvsnpMrNhClfzGptZ8Yw/edit?usp=sharing>.

³⁷ Ibid.

growth and development. When women feel safe and supported in their workplaces, they are more likely to contribute meaningfully, innovate, and remain in their jobs long-term. Conversely, the unchecked prevalence of sexual harassment hampers Fiji's ability to achieve sustainable development goals, particularly those related to gender equality, decent work, and economic growth.

FWRM's advocacy for stronger legal protections, public awareness campaigns, and workplace training is essential in fostering a safer, more equitable environment that enables women to thrive.³⁸ However, as Lata pointed out, legislative reform alone is not enough.³⁹ True development requires a cultural shift where patriarchy is dismantled, and all forms of violence against women, including sexual harassment, are recognized as barriers to economic and social progress. By addressing these underlying issues, Fiji can create an environment where women's total economic and social contributions are realized, driving broader national development.

Conclusion

The vision of a prosperous society is one where all individuals can thrive, contribute to economic growth, and participate in their communities' social and political life. Gender equality is fundamental to realizing this vision, as it ensures that women and men have equal opportunities to succeed and contribute to their society's prosperity. In the Pacific Islands, the persistence of gender inequalities, including the prevalence of sexual harassment, poses a significant barrier to achieving this vision.

By addressing sexual harassment and promoting gender equality, the Pacific Islands can create more inclusive and equitable societies where all citizens can contribute to and benefit from economic and social progress. This, in turn, will support the region's efforts to achieve the broader goals of peace, security, and sustainable development.

Acknowledgments: I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the incredible women of the Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FWRM), whose insights and dedication have greatly contributed to this research. A special thank you to Bernice Lata, Legal Rights Officer of FWRM, for sharing her knowledge on the legal challenges and cultural complexities surrounding sexual harassment in Fiji. Your expertise and passion for justice have been truly inspiring. I am also grateful to Priyanka Chandra, Team Leader for the Gender and Transitional Justice Program, whose perspectives on gender equality and transitional justice provided depth to this work. This research would not have been possible without your generous time and contributions. Thank you for the meaningful work you do every day.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.



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October 2024